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Picking and Choosing

Heiku Jaime McLeod

Years ago, when I was a newspaper reporter working on what I thought would be just another quirky human interest feature, I found myself sitting across a worn wooden dining-room table from the first Zen Buddhist priest I'd ever met. Her shaved head and robes made her seem exotic, and there was something undeniably sphinx-like in her demeanor, but her warmth and geniality, coupled with her easy, generous laugh, set me at ease.

"What led you to this," I asked, gesturing around the temple, to everything and nothing in particular.

She paused, considering the question for a long while before answering. Finally, she replied, "I was looking for peace of mind." In a world where the law of impermanence leaves us with nothing to hold onto, she said, "If your peace of mind depends on your loved ones not dying, or you not dying, you're in trouble." True peace, she told me, is not dependent on external conditions. Even in our dying breath, we always have everything we need.

I didn't know much at all about Buddhism, and what I thought I knew, from high school and college world religion surveys, had been badly distorted. But as someone with, as one of my health-care providers once put it, "an extensive trauma history," as well as a familial predisposition to depression, anxiety, and alcoholism, I knew—with more certainty than I'd ever known anything before—I wanted that kind of peace. And if practicing Zen could give me that, then I supposed I would have to start practicing Zen.

I felt less certain, however, about how exactly sitting around on a little black cushion and chanting a bunch of words I didn't

understand was supposed to impart the peace of mind I so desperately craved. And when I finally began to get an inkling, I couldn't help but feel skeptical. The crux of this dissonance could be summed up in the opening lines of "On Trust in the Heart," a famous poem by Jianzhi Sengcan, the third patriarch of Zen in China, which appears in the service books of many Zen centers:

The perfect way is only difficult for those who pick and choose.

Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear.

Make a hairbreadth difference and heaven and earth are set apart.

If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against.

The struggle between for and against is the mind's worst disease.

Even farther back, we can see the outlines of this teaching right in Shakyamuni Buddha's Four Noble Truths, one of the earliest and most basic teachings he offered after his enlightenment experience under the Bodhi tree.

First, there is *dukkha*—that is, discomfort and discontent, or as some translate it, suffering. We never have enough of what we want; we jealously guard what we do have, desperately, futilely, trying to keep it; and we're always getting more and more of what we don't want.

Second, the cause of that discomfort and discontent is our own clinging and aversion.

Third, there is a way out of this discomfort and discontent. We don't have to endure it forever.

And fourth, the way out is to ardently train our minds to let go of our clinging and aversion by practicing the Buddha's Eightfold Path.

In other words, "Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear."

That promise, that we can be free from suffering, is Buddhism's major draw. It's so simple, and yet sounds too good to be true, as

though Shakyamuni took a marketing class from Zig Ziglar. “Be free from suffering in eight simple steps! No money down! Act now!” Who wouldn’t want to at least look into it?

For me, though, as compelling as that promise was, I also felt some unease with it. Let go of my preferences? And then what? Let the world descend into chaos? Wash my hands of my commitment to social justice, of my heartfelt desire to see an end to poverty, war, sexism, racial inequality, or the despoilment of our planet? So what if kids in developing countries—hell, kids in our own country—are eating garbage or breathing toxic fumes? As long as I have inner peace, that’s all that matters, right?

My feelings echoed the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “There are certain things in our nation and in the world [to] which I am proud to be maladjusted.” If starting down the Buddhist path meant not caring—if it meant learning to become adjusted to horror and injustice—I wasn’t sure I wanted any part of it.

And, indeed, there have been Buddhists throughout history who succumbed to just such pernicious quietism, of retreating from the world and refusing to sully their hands with material concerns. But, to my thinking, this interpretation of the teachings misses the mark.

The environmental activist, author, and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy hit upon this very difficulty in a 2014 dialogue with members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship:

Western Buddhists . . . are very suspicious of attachment. They feel they need to be detached . . . so don’t get upset about racism, or injustice, or the poison in the rivers, because that . . . means you’re too attached. This causes some difficulty for me, because I’m attached. I think one of the problems with Westernized Buddhists is premature equanimity. When the Buddha said “don’t be attached,” he meant don’t be attached to the ego.⁽¹⁾

Macy is among a growing number of “engaged Buddhists,” practitioners who, prompted by teachings on compassion and the direct realization that all beings are inextricably interconnected, engage in social action as a form of practice. To me, that’s just as it should be. My root teacher, Peter Seishin Wohl, has always insisted the term

“engaged Buddhism” is redundant. To practice the Buddha Way, he always said, is to be engaged, intimately, with the world and all of its suffering beings.

So I cringe when I hear the aim of Buddhism described as “detachment.” I prefer the term “nonattachment,” which doesn’t conjure the same connotations of being aloof or disinterested—of being “checked out”—that detachment does. Waking up is not about checking out. It’s about checking in, fearlessly facing what’s in front of us without denial, without our habitual storylines, and without retreating to the safety of our fantasy worlds or addictions.

This idea shows up in the second case of *The Blue Cliff Record*, which both quotes and expands upon “On Trust in the Heart.”

Chao-chou, teaching the assembly, said, “The Ultimate Path is without difficulty; just avoid picking and choosing. As soon as there are words spoken, ‘this is picking and choosing, this is clarity.’ This old monk does not abide within clarity; do you still preserve anything or not?”

At that time a certain monk asked, “Since you do not abide within clarity, what do you preserve?”

Chao-chou replied, “I don’t know either.”

The monk said, “Since you don’t know, Teacher, why do you nevertheless say that you do not abide within clarity?”

Chao-chou said, “It is enough to ask about the matter; bow and withdraw.”⁽²⁾

Many of us come to Zen because we crave clarity in an uncertain world, but Chao-chou understood that to abide within clarity would mean clinging to an idealized state called “clarity,” rather than being present right here and now. This open, accepting state of mind is often referred to by Zen teachers, ancient and modern, as “not knowing.” Far from the “not knowing” of ignorance, this “not knowing” means letting go of what we think we know—of what our grasping, clinging egos think we or others need—and attending to what is.

It doesn’t mean we can’t use the wisdom we’ve gained from experience. And it doesn’t mean we won’t have preferences. As long as we are human beings who live and breathe, we will always have preferences. (I, for one, have a strong preference for breathing.) It

means we don't have to be hemmed in by what we know or what we want. It means we stay open to possibilities and present to reality, even when things don't go quite how we think they should.

Several years ago, the award-winning journalist Ben Sherwood interviewed dozens of people who had survived life threatening situations—plane crashes, shipwrecks, concentration camps. The resulting book, *The Survivor's Club*, was an exploration into whether his subjects had any unifying strategies or personal qualities the rest of us could learn from. One of the most poignant takeaways for me was that several survivors attributed their continued existence to their ability to accept the reality of what happened to them. Survivor after survivor shared stories of others who might also have escaped with their lives had they not fallen apart in the crucial moments or hours after the precipitating crisis, unable to process and integrate the new, painful reality they suddenly inhabited.

One of those survivors was Tim Sears, a thirty-one-year-old Michigander who fell overboard from a cruise ship into the Gulf of Mexico. Sears survived alone at sea for more than twelve hours before he was rescued by a Maltese copper freighter. Of Sears's ordeal, Sherwood writes:

He didn't cry out to God, asking why this was happening. Instead, he accepted the new reality and dealt with it. Well, I'm here, he told himself. If I'm going to get out of this situation, I need to keep maintaining and be strong and get through it until at least daylight.⁽³⁾

One might assume positive thinking would be crucial to maintaining the will to survive, but some of Sherwood's interviewees suggested otherwise. Paul Barney, a shipwreck survivor who nearly froze to death clinging to a life raft in the frigid Baltic Sea, recalled a fellow passenger he dubbed "Mr. Positive," who was "quite a vociferous character."

"We're going to be saved,' he would say. 'They're coming for us. It won't be long.'" Sometime before dawn, Mr. Positive fell silent, succumbing to the cold. "Sadly, his positivity ran out . . . He was let down too often. And that would have taken a toll on him quite a lot . . . raising his hopes and hav-

ing them dashed time and time again . . . would have really stripped him of his energy.”⁽⁴⁾

Sherwood associates this effect with the so-called Stockdale Paradox, named for Admiral James Stockdale, the highest ranking American prisoner of war during the Vietnam conflict. When writer Jim Collins asked Stockdale which of his fellow POWs perished first, the admiral replied, “Oh, that’s easy. The optimists.” He went on to explain that they “were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come and Christmas would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”⁽⁵⁾

But isn’t cultivating equanimity in the face of difficult circumstances the same thing as positive thinking? After all, in another case from *The Blue Cliff Record*, Master Yun Men Weyan famously said, “Every day is a good day.” To understand Master Yun Men’s pronouncement as promoting Pollyannaism—as a forebear of Pangloss’s “All is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds”—is to take his words out of context, though. To help clarify this point, here is the case in its entirety:

Yun Men said, “I don’t ask you about before the fifteenth day; try to say something about after the fifteenth day.”

Yun Men himself answered for everyone, “Every day is a good day.”⁽⁶⁾

In the lunar calendar, the fifteenth day of the month falls around the time of the full moon. And the full moon is a traditional symbol of enlightenment and clarity. In asking the assembly to “say something about after the fifteenth day,” Yun Men was challenging them to bring forth an expression of their awakening. His “Every day is a good day” wasn’t the pronouncement of a man wearing rose-colored glasses, but a reminder that every day, every instant, offers us an opportunity to awaken. That, in fact, there is no other time in which we can awaken.

Too often, in some of the sexier books about Zen, the dropping away of body and mind and the emergence of our original face can sound like some kind of spiritual jackpot. If we just keep pumping quarters into the meditation slot machine, someday we might hit

it big. But enlightenment is not a state we reach once and for all. Enlightenment is a daily vow, a daily struggle, to maintain equanimity even in the midst of the joys and sorrows of our fragile human existence—even when our hearts are broken, and they will break if we're paying attention—and to use that equanimity to help us work for the benefit of all beings.

It's not that Sherwood's survivors felt no emotion about their situations, or that they sat placidly, in perfect samadhi, amid the twisted wreckage that had, not long before, been sailing gracefully through the raging sea or the sky above. I'd bet not one of them was "detached." Each of them fought tooth and nail against adversity—injury, illness, exposure, hunger, thirst, and fear of never being found—doing whatever needed to be done to ensure their survival. Pushing aside the inevitable despair and self-pity that each of us is so familiar with at times, they kept their heads clear and their eyes on dealing with whatever necessity was in front of them, finding water or shelter, seeking a way out, or signaling for rescue. Instead of panicking, they simply did the next thing that needed to be done until they were safe.

This metaphor can easily be extended to any situation we find ourselves in. Whether we're trying to overcome an addiction or a neurotic tendency, achieve a personal goal, or are standing up to confront environmental devastation or systemic oppression, we must start from a place of what the Insight Meditation teacher Tara Brach calls "radical acceptance." This acceptance doesn't mean we give up on improving ourselves or our world. It doesn't mean we decide everything is fine just the way it is, so let's open another box of Twinkies and binge-watch the next season of our favorite Netflix show. And it doesn't mean we're free to float in eternal bliss on a lotus petal in some heavenly being realm we've created in our own minds, either.

Letting go of like and dislike means we don't wait for some ideal future situation to begin working toward the change we want to see in the world, or in ourselves. Because that future will never come. We only ever have right now, so we have to start from who and where we are. Like a good doctor, if we want to heal ourselves, our fellow beings, and our world, we have to start by looking deeply at and acknowledging the sickness and its causes. A doctor doesn't

wait until the patient is well to begin healing her. As paradoxical as it may seem, if we want to bring about what could be, we must begin by embracing and accepting what is. If we try to push painful realities away, to separate from them, to retreat into the comfortable certainty of our likes and dislikes, we'll never be able to see clearly what needs to be done. Our egos will be in the way.

When we are able to practice true acceptance and intimacy with every aspect of our lives, we may even experience moments of genuine transcendence—not mere dissociation, crass sentimentality, or bypassing—right within our darkest hours. Remember Tim Sears? Sherwood writes:

Tim even managed to take time to marvel at nature's beauty. Indeed the most memorable experience of the entire ordeal, he says, came when "all of a sudden everything around me for as far as I could see were bright green little fish jumping." He stopped swimming just to look. "It was like, wow, this is amazing." At that precise moment, he thought, there was no place else in the world you could see such a stunning sight. "It was beautiful."⁽⁷⁾

Sears's story has echoes of an old Zen story, made famous in the last century by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away at the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!⁽⁸⁾

Zen practitioners don't need to reside in a fantasy world, pretending everything is OK, even as the sky is literally falling. We simply do the next right thing, one step after another, tending to whatever needs to be tended to, letting go of whatever weighs us down.

Notes

1. Richard Eskow, "Don't Just Sit There, Do Something," Tricycle, November 10, 2014, tricycle.org/trikedaily/dont-just-sit-there-do-something/.
2. Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1977), 10.
3. Ben Sherwood, *The Survivors Club* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009), 211.
4. Sherwood, *The Survivors Club*, 41.
5. Sherwood, *The Survivors Club*, 41–42.
6. Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, 37.
7. Sherwood, *The Survivors Club*, 212.
8. Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1958), 22–23.